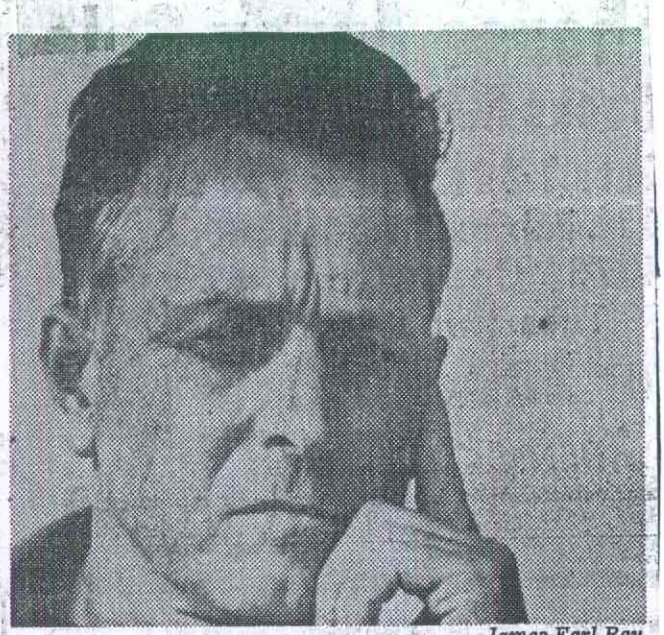

James Earl Ray

'Because I Love Him'

10/14/78

By Carol Byrd

Special to The Washington Post

PETROS, Tenn.—"I love him. And I want people to know that. He's a loving man with incredible endurance and strength," says Anna Sandhu of her new husband, James Earl Ray, the confessed assassin of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The couple exchanged marriage vows and simple gold wedding bands yesterday behind the walls of Brushy Mountain Penitentiary.

"I married him because I love him. And because I know he's not a murderer," said the 32-year-old divorced woman who makes her living as an impressionistic painter.

The "wedding chapel" was the second floor visitors' lounge at the maximum security prison. Only five non-

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Anna Sandhu

'I Married Him Because I Love Him'

MARRIAGE, From B1

prison guests were allowed because the warden wanted to avoid a circus atmosphere. One guest was Mark Lane, who is Ray's attorney.

No media people were permitted inside the prison, though several attempted to get Sandhu's story. The National Enquirer offered $15,000 for exclusive coverage and she turned them down. She will be getting $300 for her sketch of the wedding for Newsweek magazine. She needed the money, she says, because she is having trouble paying the rent.

"I'm poor, but damn, I want to be honest for James' sake," she says. "They're notorious for saying the wrong thing and I didn't want any bad publicity about what I was doing.

"I feel so good about my decision to marry James. At first, I was a little nervous. But now I'm very happy about the whole thing."

She talks about happiness on the eve of her wedding while riding in the front seat of an aging Torino—driven by her matron-of-honor and "the best friend I have," Barbara Murrell. They are en route to the Hyatt Regency, Knoxville's elite hotel, to meet with representatives of a London newspaper about exclusive picture rights to the wedding.

"I hope people don't think I'm wrong in taking money for this," she says. "I guess it would be like Elvis drawing a picture of himself in a casket before he died, and selling it."

She turns down the London offer of $2,000. "I just figured the hell with all these people. I'm tired of being hounded." People magazine has been waiting since noon for an interview. Ray's ring is a half-size too small.

"Sometimes I wish this were all over so I could just go home and paint, she says.

She says she hasn't really been criticized, "face to face, anyway," about her decision to marry the man she met while doing sketches of a court hearing for a television station.

She realizes that not everyone believes he is a "charming, lovable man."

"All that the American people know about James is what those devils have concocted in their useless books," she says bitterly in reference to "He Slew The Dreamer" and "The Making of an Assassin," two novels about the King slaying.

Anna admits her married life with Ray may be one of monitored prison visits—twice a week at four hours each. (Ray is serving a 99-year term.)

"I guess that doesn't sound like much of a marriage, but at least I'll know where my husband is at night."

That joke is the only one she makes about her marriage, which came about in an odd way. Nobody really proposed, she says, "I just told him that I wouldn't mind marrying him."

That was eight months after they met.

The two first saw each other in June 1977 during Ray's preliminary hearing on a prison escape charge.

Ray at the House assassinations hearings, by James K. W. Atherton —The Washington Post

She was working for a television station, during pictures.

No words were exchanged. But an Anna sketched the 50-year-old convict, questions came to her mind. Did he act alone?

To ask those questions she interviewed Ray in January of this year for a local television station.

"He was surprisingly friendly," she recalls. "I took the money I made off that assignment and bought him some books for Christmas."

Ray wrote a thank-you note for the books, one of Carl Sandburg's poetry and another on photography. She requested a private visit with him; he agreed.

"I was extremely nervous the first time," she says. "But I was really intrigued by him and I wanted to find out as much about him as I could.

"We talked a pretty long while, and I came to realize that he wasn't the big monster everybody made him seem to be." Their courtship consisted of twice-a-week visits in a barren prison room.

It's the "big, bad Ray," image that Sandhu has been fighting.

She was in Washington when Ray testified before the House Committee on Assassinations. The experience reenforced her feelings that Ray has been set up.

"Those committee hearings were a farce," she says. "They don't actually want to know who killed King. They've got James behind bars as a scapegoat, and it just isn't right."

She knows people will be watching, that people will continuously want to know why an attractive young blond married a convicted assassin.

"It's . . . hard, so hard," she says, raising her eyebrows in a silent appeal.

"James told me it would be."